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SOME REASONS briefly Suggested,

Which have prevail'd with the

Dissenters

IN

BRISTOL

To continue their

Open Meetings

However

Prosecuted or Disturb'd.

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To the READER.

Reader,

THou haſt heard I preſume of the great Zeal wherewith the Diſſenters at Briſtol have been proſecuted; how the Preachers have been fin'd and impriſon'd, and one of moſt eminency dead in Priſon; the people alſo diſturb'd, ſummon'd and proceeded againſt in the Eccleſiaſtick Courts; proſecuted on the 35th. of Elizabeth that iſſues in Baniſhment or Hanging: They have been alſo threatned, (and the City alſo for their ſakes;) hal'd to Priſons, and Fines levied on their Eſtates, and yet go on with their open Aſſemblies. I have hereupon made it my buſineſs to learn what may be the grounds of this unuſual carriage; and the beſt I can obtain (ſuch as they are) without determining any thing of their Validity, I have here expoſed unto thy Cenſure.

Farewel.

Some Reaſons briefly Suggeſted, which have prevail'd with the Diſſenters in Briſtol *to continue their open Meetings.*

THAT the Diſſenters ſhould perſiſt againſt all the Methods, us'd for the ſuppreſſion of their Meetings, and that to their preſent Miſchief, and probable Ruines; and together incur the Reproach of Obſtinate and Perverſe, Contemners of all Laws and Civil Sanctions, and give (as it has been phraſed) ſo intolerable an Affront to the Kings Authority, and the Government of the City; ſeems very ſtrange unto many, both their Friends and Adverſaries, and has occaſioned me with ſome curioſity to examine, and now to communicate the true Reaſons of theſe their Proceedings: They ſay then, that their Worſhip in its own nature, is innocent, and muſt be ſo acknowledged by their ſevereſt Adverſaries; for they do no other therein, than what is done in the Publick; Pray unto God, Praiſe him by Singing, and hear his Word, read, or preached; ſo that if there be no Evil in that other, there can certainly be none in theirs, which is all contained in that; and, if the whole be blameleſs, ſo are its parts: And as for a ſinful Defect, it cannot be ſaid, with any ſhew of truth, that any thing omitted by them is ſo abſolutely needful, that an acceptable Worſhip cannot be performed without it: nor has any, that they know, charg'd them with any ſuch Omiſſion; ſo that, what-ever be the Caſe of tolerating a falſe, or idolatrous, or ſinful Worſhip, they think themſelves excluded from that debate. They add; that in ſeveral things they cannot joyn with the Publick, without offering violence to their Conſciences; which is a tender part, and a wound therein is deep and dangerous: Nor dare I contradict what they thus ſay, leſt I be judged prodigiouſly uncharitable; for I know that they are not all out of their wits, ſome are knowing, ſober, and diſcreet, nor can they all be imagin'd falſe and hypocritical

critical: It were almoſt a Miracle, if ſo many people, who in all things elſe are obſerved to make a Conſcience, ſhould in this one thing make no Conſcience at all: nor dares Malice it ſelf thus charge them; all ſober men, who converſe with, or did ever write againſt, or of them, do, and muſt acknowledge, many of the Preachers to be both Pious, Able, and Learned; and, of the People, the far greater number to be Conſcientious, and Prudent perſons. They tell us alſo, that they cannot command their Conſciences, nor compel themſelves to think otherwiſe of thoſe things, than they now do: And, in this, I conceive they have Reaſon; for, though a man may be bribed by Intereſt, or enforced by Violence, to ſtifle and ſuppreſs his Apprehenſions; yet, to alter theſe Apprehenſions at his pleaſure, he hath not a power, that is, his Judgment is not ſubject to the diſpoſe of his Will: And, for this they have the ſuffrage alſo (beſides others) of the Learned Biſhop *Taylor*, and Mr. *Bayes* himſelf, that inveterate Enemy to Nonconformiſts.

No man can change his opinion when he will, or be ſatisfied in his Reaſon, that his own Opinion is falſe becauſe diſcountenanc'd, *Liberty of Proph.* p.200. a man is bound to aſſent, but according to the operation of the Argument, and the energy of the perſwaſion, nor indeed can he though never ſo fain, *p.* 202. nor one can have power to reſtrain the perſwaſions of his Conſcience, *Eccl. Pol.* p. 15. Though he thence wiſely infers; therefore the Magiſtrate muſt puniſh Diſſenters, Puniſh them becauſe they cannot help it; well concluded for a Modern Profeſſor of Controverſies!

And indeed it carries the face of a *Poſtulatum*, that needs not ſo much a proof, as an Explication: Men cannot forbear but they muſt aſſent, according to the evidence of the thing propoſed. They moreover Judge, that an indiſpenſible Obligation lies upon them to worſhip God; and, if poſſible, in the face of the World: That as to make an open and voluntary payment, in ſome Aſſembly (congregated to that purpoſe,) of the Homage due to the Soveraign Creator, from all his Creatures, capable of doing that Homage, (That they ought not to forſake the aſſembling of themſelves together, as the manner of ſome is;) and that, though thus to meet, may in ſome Caſes be

be forborn for a while, to avoid Scandals, or obtain some great End: Affirmative Precepts bind not (*ad semper*) to be always performed, but the Duties enjoyned (*pro hic & nunc*) at some seasons, may be omitted; yet they are not satisfied in their Conscience, that at this time, and under the Circumstances they are now placed, they can honestly forbear, and not pay this allowed Homage. It's true, they are hereby exposed to the Censure of being contumacious; But they do not think, that for that Censure they are to be excused, should they neglect so great a Duty; and altogether countenance the common Calumny, no less frequently than unjustly cast upon them; that Gain is their Godliness; Pinch their Purses, and they will let go their Religion; To save their money, deny their God, and also, by the same neglect, evidently betray the profession of Goodness unto Contempt; make sport for the prophane, and hypocritical mockers in Feasts, and confirm the hair-brain'd Atheist, in his sensless blasphemous Frenzies. Besides, should they confine themselves to their private Devotions, or to less numbers; others, on that pretence might lie idle at home, or walk the Fields, or cast up their Shop-Books (when there are accounts to cast of another nature;) or only meet to consume the Lords Day in talking vainly, or of worldly business, or in doing something much worse; and some might by degrees be seduc'd to entertain Opinions, directly opposite to the Christian Belief; which great scandals ought carefully to be heeded. And further, which they ought as carefully to avoid; they are not Ignorant, that by retiring into places of more Secrecy, let their Meetings be never so innocent, yet they would be rendred more suspicious, and be liable to be accused, with greater shew than now they can, of being seditious Conventicles; for in clandestine and sculking Assemblies, it is not impossible but Conspiracies may be contriv'd; nor can there be security of the contrary, but from the known Integrity of the persons so assembled: But in open, and free for all, (Spies and Informers as well as others) to come as they please, and make their observations, nothing can be suggested, with any safety, that but clashes with the present Establishments; much

less

leſs can any pernicious, or dangerous Deſign be therein, either propos'd, or manag'd; unleſs by ſuch, who are reſolved to betray both themſelves and Friends unto manifeſt and unavoidable Ruine.---

And as to what ſome have ſaid; that by forbearing to meet, or not ſo publickly, their Caſe would be recommended with more advantage to the Houſes of Parliament, and with greater hopes to obtain ſome eaſe, the vanity of this conceit was eaſy to be diſcern'd; for they plainly foreſaw a far greater probability, that a declining their Duty at that time (*pro nunc*) would be rather urg'd to their prejudice, by rendring them contemptible, and an indulgence unneceſſary (which ſome alſo thought was the end of all theſe Violences) than, that an Argument of weight could be thence drawn in their favour; ſhould any of theſe worthy Patriots, at length think fit, after ſo many years experience of their patient Sufferings and peaceable Demeanors, to make any propoſals for their future Relief. And, as to the affront done to Authority, and the Government, (which is the great Objection, and complaint,) they ſay, they make no reſiſtance; they do not return evil for evil; they appear before the Magiſtrates (by themſelves, or Council) on every Summons, and ſubmit to the penalties whereto condemned: and they farther tell us, that *Daniel* did not, when prohibited, forbear to Worſhip; and yet is bold to acquaint his Soveraign; *Before him* (that is God) *Innocency was found in me, and againſt thee* (*O King*) *have I done no hurt*: So that a perſon may diſobey a Law, forbidding to worſhip God, and yet remain a Loyal Subject to his Prince. As to that of charging the Laws with too great Severity, or the Makers with Perſecution; they ſay, they utterly abhor that ill-natur'd Inference; and deteſt the Guilt of reflecting a diſhonour on their Superiours: They deſire onely to be ſatisfied in the Lawfulneſs of what themſelves do, but preſume not to cenſure any, much leſs the Supreme Authority, which they know to be the alone Judg of what beſt ſecures the Publick, and Proteſtant Intereſt, and is neceſſary to preſerve the whole Community: In which caſe (as in the Univerſe,

verſe, particulars Bodies to preſerve it's Integrity, will forgo their natural inclinations;) they muſt be content to ſuffer, if it cannot be, but by an indulgence of them the whole ſhall be endammaged: and yet they know, that probationary Laws are ſometimes made, *et in terrorem*; and they alſo think, they may ſafely reply to ſuch perſons, who, by pretending a Zeal for the Laws would fain warrant all their violences; that, if they may not be thought to be perſecuted, who are Proſecuted by eſtabliſhed Laws, neither was *Daniel*, nor the *three Children*; and if none were Martyrs, who were ſo condemned, there were few or no Martyrs among the Primitive Chriſtians; nor would there be many found to this very day. But, after all this, ſuppoſe they ſhould neglect to meet; what particular advantage could they thence expect? They are ſtill Tranſgreſſors of the Civil Sanctions; for there are others, that oblige them to go to Church, and to receive the Sacraments: So that they are no leſs liable to be Guilty of breaking the Laws, whether they ſerve God in theſe open Aſſemblies, or wholly forbear: nor is the Puniſhment leſs grievous, in caſe of ſuch neglect, which their Conſciences can ſo ill bear; for it is not the Act againſt Conventicles, which they have ſo much reaſon to be apprehenſive of, as that of the 35 th. of *Elizabeth*, upon which they are alſo proſecuted; which, if in force (and reaches their caſe, as their adverſaries pretend) will infallibly either Baniſh or Hang them; and which if they eſcape, they are certainly caught in the nooz of Excommunication; that leaves them, after much vexation, to rot at length in a ſtinking Goal: So that, let them not meet at all, they can expect no other but unavoidable Ruine; nay, if they meet in leſſer numbers, it's then as evident, that the very Conventicle act it ſelf, will give the Informers yet more, and greater advantages againſt them; that is, they thereby expoſe themſelves and Families to further miſchiefs: For, when they think to conceal their Meetings, they are purſu'd into the remoteſt, and moſt Secret corners of the City, and attempts made to break open the Doors; and in the more houſes they meet (and ſo alſo the more Preachers they have) the more twenty-pound Fines are they liable to pay, for theſe both Houſes and Preachers:

ers: So that on the whole they Judg, they are not to be accused of any impiety towards God, contempt of the Laws, disloyalty to their Soveraign, nor imprudence towards themselves, by thus perſevering to Worſhip in the great Congregation. And now to ſhut up this haſty Paper, let that be mine, and the wiſh of all honeſt good-natured Engliſh-men, who wiſh well to the Nation, and to the Reformed Religion, with which the Excellent Doctor *Stillingfleet* juſt concludes one of his Sermons; and wherewith I alſo ſhall conclude: *Would to God we could at laſt learn that Wiſdom from our Enemies* (that is, from the Court of Rome,) *not to widen our own Differences by inveterate heats, bitterneſs and animoſities among our ſelves, but to find out ways, whereby even the Diſſenters in ſmaller things may be made uſeful for the maintenance of the Common Intereſt of our Church and Religion.*

FINIS.